

The Gunderson Historic District

The Gunderson Historic District is located in south Oak Park and consists of two discrete but related areas of single-family and two-flat apartments developed by the firm of S. T. Gunderson and Sons during the first decade of the 20th century. The single-family homes are predominantly American Foursquare types. Although the homes were part of two separate planned subdivisions with great similarities in design among the various buildings, each structure is individualized with original detailing

of Colonial Revival, Arts and Crafts, or Prairie style influence.

The sameness of house style, identical setbacks and other common features of these subdivisions foreshadow later suburban development.

Both discrete areas of the Historic District were

designed to provide homeownership to a burgeoning middle class. This meant building a community that emphasized both the proximity and good transportation to the jobs of nearby Chicago and the amenities of a high-class suburban community including excellent schools, plentiful churches and other desired services.

The Gunderson Family

S.T. Gunderson and Sons represents a firm started by successful Norwegian immigrants. Severt T. Gunderson came to the United States in 1848 at the age of nine. At 18 he went into business as a builder, and quickly acquired important timber and mill holdings, all of which were destroyed by fire in 1875. He soon started a second business — manufacturing doors and sashes, which he operated with his son Seward. This business was also destroyed by fire. In 1885 Severt and his two sons formed the firm of S.T. Gunderson and Sons, “homebuilders” and real estate



investors. Severt and wife Emily had two sons, Seward and George, both of whom worked in the family business. Seward joined his father in the lumber business in 1883 and became the managing partner in 1893. George’s career began in his father’s lumber company in 1881. He was later the manager of W.J. Frawley and Company, lumber inspectors. George joined his father and brother in business in 1885. In 1899 he organized the Acme Steel Company, Inc., where he was treasurer and general manager until 1924.

Seward Gunderson followed the pattern of many first-generation immigrants by assimilating into the American culture. In 1907, he and his family moved to Oak Park, where they had built a large house in the heart of the second Gunderson development. Seward consciously presented himself as an example for his neighbors to emulate. He was a prominent member of the community and involved in social affairs as a member of many organizations: Oak Park’s first zoning board; president of Oak Park Republican Club and delegate of National Republican convention in 1944; Oak Park Chamber of Commerce; Chicago Real Estate Board of Underwriters; Chicago Athletic Association; charter member of the Oak Park Country Club; treasurer of the Park District of Oak Park from 1912 to 1920; secretary of his brother’s firm, the Acme Steel Company from 1899 to 1903; Metropolitan Lodge, Oriental Consistory; Knights Templar; and Medinah Temple.

S.T. Gunderson and Sons continued to develop homes in Oak Park and Chicago through the 1920s. Between 1905 and 1920

Gunderson subdivided several tracts of land in south Oak Park and built, financed and sold more than 600 single family homes for prices ranging from \$4,000 to \$12,000. The Gunderson firm subdivided an Oak Park neighborhood along Columbian and Fair Oaks Avenues north of Augusta Street in 1922, and the Greenfield subdivision at Harlem Avenue and Division Street in 1925. The firm continued to subdivide land in Chicago’s Garfield Park neighborhood and in Elmwood Park north of Oak Park.

First Gunderson Subdivision

The Gundersons established several subdivisions in Chicago and Oak Park between 1889 and 1925. The earliest subdivisions were on the west side of Chicago. The first Gunderson development in Oak Park was the Gunderson and Gauger’s addition, platted in 1890, located on Home and Wenonah avenues between Harrison Street and Roosevelt Road. Gunderson owned this land for 15 years, waiting for a five-cent railroad fare to Chicago before commencing construction. With his own funds, Gunderson constructed a station of the Metropolitan elevated train line at nearby Maple Avenue for the convenience of the new residents. The 59 houses were quickly sold once construction began in 1905. This area is referred to as the first Gunderson development of Oak Park.

Second Gunderson Subdivision

The second Gunderson development in Oak Park, located between Harrison and



Madison Streets, and Gunderson and South Ridgeland Avenues, was constructed shortly after the first Oak Park subdivision. Gunderson located this subdivision directly north of the Metropolitan Garfield elevated train line, with a station on Gunderson Avenue that connected Oak Park to Chicago. The firm located two branch offices in the core of the neighborhood — one at South Elmwood Avenue and Harrison Street, and one at South Elmwood Avenue and Adams Street. This second subdivision was prominently promoted in the local newspapers, with weekly advertisements in the local Oak Leaves. The second subdivision includes 208 single-family homes and 22 two-flats.

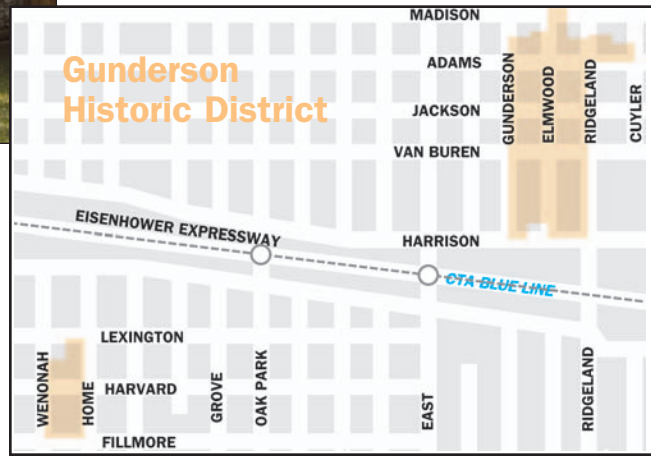
Gunderson Two-Flats

Gunderson originally subscribed to the beliefs of numerous Oak Park residents and did not support the construction of apartments in his subdivision. Gunderson concluded “that so large a proportion of our urban population is housed in the cubby holes of the modern apartment is a grave menace to the future of the race is a fact that needs no visitor from a long past century to point out.”

Advertisements for the Gunderson subdivision frequently promoted home ownership over renting. The New Book of Standard Gunderson Homes referred to the renter as “a piece of driftwood, subject to many buffeting gales, while the homeowner is a staunch ship, upon the same sea of life.” One of the early ads for Gunderson Homes touted the importance “to realize that this is a community of homes — no flats, no apartments — nothing but artistic homes.” The warranty deeds conveyed to the purchaser of a Gunderson home prohibited the future erection of flat apartment buildings on the home’s lot.

Gunderson’s opinions had changed by 1915 when he began constructing two-family





homes at the northeast edge of the second Gundersen development. Gundersen's audience did not change — he was attracting homebuyers, not renters. The advertisements for these properties spoke of making the purchaser “a rent receiver instead of a rent payer.” The ads recommended that the purchaser should live in one unit and rent out the second. Seward's own son, Miles, lived in the two-flat building at 530 South Ridgeland in 1922. In 1920, S.T. Gundersen and Sons built their last apartment building in this development.

What is an Historic District?

An historic district is an area within geographically definable boundaries, possessing a significant concentration of properties united by past events or aesthetically by plan or physical development that has been designated as an Oak Park Historic District pursuant to Village ordinance. Most buildings in an historic district contribute to the significance of the area without individually having the credentials of a Landmark. These buildings are referred to as Contributing Resources. They help to maintain the historic integrity of the neighborhood. Individual properties designated as Historic Landmarks are Contributing Resources within a district. An historic district can have buildings that do not contribute to the significance of the district. These buildings, referred to as Non-Contributing Resources, usually are less than 50 years old or have been significantly altered in the recent past.



Oak Park

For more information, call or write:
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